

Submission to French Government  
to abandon plans to build a third airport for Paris

by George and Shirley Stevens, 2002

## FRANCE'S UNKNOWN SOLDIER



Last September my wife Shirley and I joined a small group doing a conducted tour of the WWI battlefields of France. Ron Austin was the tour leader, the tour having been organised by Melbourne based Belmore Travel under the RSL Victoria banner.

We were invited by the French returned service organisation to lay a wreath at sunset on the tomb of France's unknown soldier at the Arc de Triomphe. The group of five L to R are Shirley, wearing her dad's gongs. Her dad was 7th FAB, 3rd Div AIF who spent most of 1918 in the Somme, and was one of the fortunate ones to return home in one piece. Vivian James is next, ex-RAAF, wearing his own and his dad's miniatures. Viv's dad was 17th Battalion present at the attack on Peronne and Mont St Quentin in the Somme. Viv's wife Lorraine was on the tour to find the grave of her grand-uncle Pte Speechley, killed in the attack on Bray on Somme. Interestingly he is buried in a French military cemetery. Next is Lloyd Outram, ex-2nd AIF WWII. Next is me, ex-Merchant Marine WWII and ex-RAN, Korea. My dad was Merchant Marine during WWI on a troop carrier. He was also RAAF during WWII. I did not have his miniatures with me, but as you see I am wearing my own. Last in line is Ron Austin with his own and his dad's miniatures.

**George Stevens**

12 Minerva Avenue  
Vincentia NSW 2540  
Tel 02 4441 6992  
email: [stevegeorge@shoalhaven.net.au](mailto:stevegeorge@shoalhaven.net.au)  
February 24, 2002

The French Ambassador,  
Embassy of France,  
8 Perth Avenue  
Yarralumla ACT 2600

Dear Ambassador,

My wife and I have read in the press of plans by your government to construct airport facilities on the present site of Australian War graves located in the Somme Valley. We are appalled that this is so, and request that you note our extreme concern that the graves of our heroes who died defending French soil will thus be desecrated.

During a recent pilgrimage to the Somme, we took many photos, copies of some are enclosed to help you and your government remember France's debt in perpetuity to Australian soldiers.

Both my wife and I have strong personal attachments to World War 1. My wife's father served in the 1st AIF 7th Field Artillery Brigade and fought right along the Somme Valley at locations such as Glisy, Fouilly, Hamel, Meharicourt, Bray, Suzanne, Peronne, Tincourt, Premont, Montbrehain. Her uncle was a member of the famed 1st Light Horse Regiment of the 1st Light Horse Brigade, serving at Gallipoli and the Sinai Desert where he was wounded and repatriated. My uncle was attached to the 3rd Division Heavy Trench Mortar Battery, and lost his left arm on the night of the 5th-6th June 1918 during an engagement near Morlancourt in the Somme. My father was an officer on a troop carrier operating between Egypt and Southampton. From these you will understand our very strong feelings about this proposed airport.

This proposed plan makes a mockery of the big signs in the Villers Bretonneux school "Noublions J'amaiz L'Australie". We ask you to remember also that Australia had absolutely nothing to gain by participating in this war. It was fought half a world away from Australia for reasons that had nothing to do with Australia. Australians went to help France because they were honorable men helping fellow men being attacked by an aggressor.

May we expect your response please.

Sincerely

Shirley Stevens

George Stevens (DVA #NKM 07257)

Copy: (Mrs) Danna Vale MP, Minister for Veterans' Affairs, Canberra ACT with enclosures  
(Mrs) Joanna Gash MP, Federal Member for Gilmore, Nowra NSW with enclosures  
Mr Ian McNamara, "Australia All Over", ABC Radio, Sydney with enclosures

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Tel 02 4441 6992  
email: [stevegeorge@shoalhaven.net.au](mailto:stevegeorge@shoalhaven.net.au)  
February 27, 2002

The Director,  
Office of Australian War Graves,  
PO Box 21,  
Woden ACT 2606

Dear Director,

You may be interested to read a copy of a letter which I wrote recently to the French Ambassador, copying my local MP, as well as the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, and also Ian MacNamara of Radio Australia.

I would appreciate receiving your comments please.

Sincerely,

George Stevens



AMBASSADE DE FRANCE

EN AUSTRALIE

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*L'Ambassadeur*

Mr and Mrs Stevens  
12 Minerva Avenue  
Vincentia - NSW 2540

Canberra, March 6, 2002

Dear Mr and Mrs Stevens,

Thank you for your recent correspondence regarding the construction of the new international airport in the Somme department. As you may be aware, it will be located near the town of Chaulnes, though the exact location will not be decided upon until the end of 2003, following public consultation.

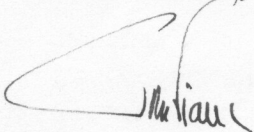
The French government places great importance on respecting the memory of the servicemen and women who fell on French soil, and thus the decision on the exact location will take into account the location of national and foreign memorials and cemeteries, as well as other significant areas of pilgrimage.

At this point no battlefields where Australians saw action, and no memorials or cemeteries ,or fields where Australian soldiers may still lie will be affected by the construction of the airport.

The major Australian cemeteries and places of pilgrimage are located some distance from Chaulnes, with Villers-Bretonneux and Le Hamel lying approximately 20 km to the west, and other memorials and cemeteries such as those at Albert, Mont St Quentin, Fromelles, Bullecourt, and Pozières lying further afield. At present the relocations only affect two sites, one French and the other German.

I remain at your disposal should you require further information with regard to this matter.

Yours sincerely,



Pierre Viaux



10 March 2002

# Premier fights to protect our heroes' graves

By chief writer NATHAN VASS

PREMIER Bob Carr is leading Australia's official protest against a French airport plan that would threaten the graves of Australian soldiers killed in World War I.

Mr Carr has officially objected to the plan, telling the French Ambassador that his Government must listen to Australian concerns over the proposal.

"In France, Australian blood stained the soil," the Premier wrote in a letter to Ambassador Pierre Viaux.

"During World War I, Australians disproportionately answered the call to defend Europe — and France — and surrendered their lives.

"At Ypres and Flanders alone, 6198 Australians died.

"It is appropriate the French Government take the views of Australians and descendants of the dead into consideration."

Labor MP Ian McManus has launched a petition to circulate around the State's RSL clubs and community groups, calling on the Federal Government to act to protect the war graves.

Mr Carr said the French must listen to the views of the



Protest: Bob Carr

Commonwealth War Graves Commission and the Office of Australian War Graves before deciding to relocate or disrupt the graves.

The proposals for a third commercial airport for Paris threaten as many as eight Commonwealth and British cemeteries and 1248 graves.

The greatest concern is for the cemetery at Fouquescourt, which contains 376 British, Australian, Canadian and South African graves from March, 1918.

Mr Carr told Ambassador Viaux the cemetery contained

44 Australian graves, including those of at least 12 men from NSW. Also at risk are 51 Australian graves at Rosières and three at Boucher.

The planned airport, which will cost nearly \$10 billion, has already been shifted once following British concerns.

But Australia's Commonwealth War Graves Commission said the new location would cause even more disruption to graves than the original plan.

"Our position remains that we do not wish to remove any graves," commission spokesman Mike Johnson said.

"We will have to talk seriously to the French Government."

The land for all war cemeteries in France was ceded in perpetuity by the French Government as a gift to the peoples of Britain and the Commonwealth, and the graves can be moved only for reasons of State.

The original \$9.6 billion plan would have forced the removal of only two British cemeteries and 66 World War I graves.

The battle to save the graves mirrors a campaign in Belgium to protect six cemeteries from a proposed road at Ypres.

12 Minerva Avenue  
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Tel 4441 6992  
email: [stevegeorge@shoalhaven.net.au](mailto:stevegeorge@shoalhaven.net.au)  
March 11, 2002

The Editor  
South Coast Register  
PO Box 106  
Nowra  
NSW 2541

Dear Editor,

Enclosed is a copy of a letter which my wife and I wrote February 24 to the French Ambassador, with copies as you see. To date Ian McNamara has read out excerpts on his program Sunday morning, and there have been listeners who have also supported our feelings.

Currently in the Shoalhaven library premises Berry Street there is a display of some of Frank Hurley's graphic photos taken in northern France during WW1. We urge all residents to look at this display, in particular the scene of our dead soldiers lying in the mud. Having inspected this excellent display, we recommend that everyone writes to the French Ambassador expressing disgust and concern about the French Government's extremely insensitive proposal to build an airport on the grave sites of our men who died fighting for French freedom.

Sincerely,

George & Shirley Stevens

Copy: Mr Geoff Hadrill, Research Librarian, Shoalhaven City Library.



Subject: MOD Addresses

Date: Tue, 12 Mar 2002 09:24:36 -0000

From: "Robinson Tim (Fire)" <trobinson@fire.cornwall.gov.uk>

To: "'stevegeorge@shoalhaven.net.au'" <stevegeorge@shoalhaven.net.au>

Dear George,

I'm beginning to get the hang of this computer business.

(I've probably just set myself up for a fall!)

Hope this helps.

Regards Tim R.

#### Ministry of Defence / Contacts / Email contacts

##### E-mailing the Ministry of Defence

The Ministry of Defence can now be contacted by e-mail.

If you wish to write to any of the Government's Defence Ministers about aspects of defence policy or the Armed Forces, please use the address given below.

Please note that we cannot reply by e-mail. You must include on your letter a return postal address.

public@ministers.mod.uk <mailto:public@ministers.mod.uk>

We will shortly be providing an online form for those who do not already have e-mail accounts (for example, users of library terminals).

Page Modified: 6th December 2001

##### CONSTRUCTION OF A19 MOTORWAY NEAR IEPER

Concerns have been raised that proposals to extend the A19 Motorway near Ieper in Belgium will disturb burials on the First World War "Ypres" battlefield.

There have been proposals to extend the A19 for some time, but it is understood that the final route will not be decided until later this year. The Commission's principal concern is that Commonwealth war cemeteries, for which it is responsible, should not be disturbed and the Belgian authorities have indicated that this will be avoided, as with previous road construction projects in Belgium.

The Commission has no responsibility for the battlefields themselves but it would be concerned should previously undiscovered remains be disturbed during the course of construction work. Should the remains of Commonwealth forces be discovered, we would expect them to be handed over to the Commission for burial in one of its war cemeteries.

##### PLANS FOR THIRD PARIS AIRPORT - IMPLICATIONS FOR WAR GRAVES

The Commission is aware that the recent announcement by the French Government that a site near Chaulnes on the Somme has been chosen for a third Paris airport has raised concerns that war graves might be disturbed.

As yet the Commission has seen no details of what is proposed and until these are received from the French authorities it is not possible to say what the implications might be. Chaulnes is in an area of the Somme where

there are few Commonwealth war burials and there is therefore no certainty that any will be affected by the proposals.

The French Government has in the past avoided the need to disturb war cemeteries when similar developments have taken place e.g. the TGV fast rail link and we have no reason to believe that they will act any differently in this instance.

Commonwealth War Graves Commission HQ E-Mail : casualty.eng@cwgc.org  
" " " " France Area E-Mail :  
france.area@cwgc.org  
" " " " Australia E-Mail :  
wargraves@dva.gov.au

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# THE HISTORY

the war vet residents prior to publishing  
and arrived in groups of up to 100 at a time  
The 1st AIF Hospital was one of the  
the world war II hospital associations  
of the  
V.M. Fagan OAM, Hon Secretary  
The Australian General Hospital  
Assoc

THANKS TO THE  
the March/April to HMAS Sydney I  
have had a tremendous response - many  
letters, phone calls, books I must have  
had my head in the clouds for I thought  
I printed 216, not 16, as many called  
told me I was wrong.  
Once again thanks to all I appreciate  
the info.  
Beverly Jackson (nee Curtis)  
Collinsville

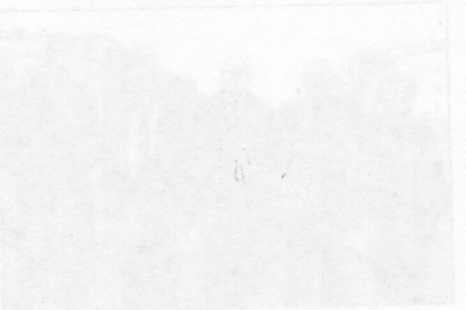
Although in this issue, the story was not  
the best but with a new approach 1998 the  
his mother with 316 - 121  
If Mrs Jackson is still interested a very  
good detailed book by Wendy Gibson  
about the 1st AIF Hospital, The French General Hospital  
which has been published and is now  
available from the publisher.  
I have just received a copy of the book and  
I imagine that the reason why Captain  
Collins was not promoted at this time of  
action is that he had been promoted to a  
more senior position as Commander  
John Collins; this Captain Burnett had  
taken over command in his place.  
W.E. Young  
Brisbane Forest

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Assoc  
Home To Third Millennium Standards  
has to date raised over \$175,000 - 98 per  
cent from within the village. Not bad for  
approximately 1000 residents many of  
WWII vintage. These funds have derived  
from individual residents, voluntary  
organizations within the village, rallies  
and trading tables and theatre functions.  
By the time the new nursing home is  
completed we should have raised  
upwards of \$400,000. These figures indi-  
cate the wonderful spirit and communi-  
ship within our beloved war vet  
How Smith, Chairman  
Funding Committee

1/2 AIF, French 1917  
This year is the 50th anniversary of the  
debate of Greece and Crete - the first  
real operation abroad of the 1/2  
Australian General Hospital. We landed  
in Greece on 12 April, erected tents and  
were ready for patients four days later.  
The 1st AIF Hospital in Greece was  
named after New South Wales under the  
command of General Forster to be  
known as the Second ANZAC Corps).  
Almost immediately after we were  
established the German advance was so  
rapid that all the nurses and physio-  
therapists and some other doctors, plus  
some other male staff, were ordered to  
be evacuated, thus ordering the remain-  
ing 102 (including six doctors) to  
become POW and take medical care of  
the current and expected casualties. One  
of those ordered out was our well  
respected founder, Colonel Fawcett who

and (c) the many services available in  
a very old and aging citizen. I will  
also mention that I do not agree with  
one of Mr. Lowe's views at 21. Australia  
will not be a 'strong' nation in the  
future a 'strong' nation.

## FRANCE'S UNKNOWN SOLDIER



I last September my wife Shirley and I  
joined a small group doing a condensed  
tour of the WWI battlefields of France.  
Ron Aubrey was the tour leader, the tour  
having been organized by Melbourne  
based Robert Tarrant under the IAF.  
Victory banner  
We were invited by the French to join a search  
service operation to lay a wreath at  
summit on the tomb of France's unknown  
soldier in the Arc de Triomphe. The  
group of the 1st AIF and Shirley and I  
and the 1st AIF who came from 1917  
the 1st AIF, and was one of the battalions  
that fought in the battle of the Somme.  
James is now 80, wearing his own  
and the 1st AIF's uniform. V's had won  
17th Battalion present at the attack on  
Levin and about 2000 in the  
somme. V's wife Lorraine was on the  
now to find the grave of her grand-neph-  
The speaker, killed in the attack on May  
the 1st AIF. Interestingly he is buried in a  
French military cemetery. He is 115  
years old, or just AIF WWI. He is one  
of the few remaining WWI and - AIF  
as a veteran of the WWI and - AIF.



# French war graves are a Govt priority

THE Australian Government would expect full consultation from France on plans for a new international airport in the Somme that might force the relocation of Australian war graves.

The French Government late last year announced plans to explore the development of a third international airport for Paris, at Chaulnes in the Somme.

While initial proposals did not affect any cemeteries con-

taining Australian war graves, authorities have now proposed nominating an enlarged zone to facilitate public consultation on the final choice of a site.

As many as eight Commonwealth cemeteries may be affected, three of which contain the remains of 61 of Australia's war dead. These are the Fouquescourt British Cemetery, the Bouchoir New British Cemetery and the World War

II Meharicourt Communal Cemetery.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission will hold a meeting today in London to discuss the latest proposals for the third Paris airport. At this meeting, our High Commissioner to Britain, Michael L'Estrange, who represents Australia on the Commission, will register the Australian people's deep concern about any development that would impact upon the

graves of Australia's war dead. Australia's Ambassador to France, William Fisher, will also register Australia's concerns with French authorities in Paris, stressing the strong desire that the graves be left undisturbed.

"We recognise that France must balance the preservation of her wartime heritage against the country's infrastructure needs," Mr Downer said.

"However, these graves are

the resting places of men who died for freedom and are sacred.

"Among them are the comrades of surviving Australian diggers who 80 years later were decorated by France with the Legion of Honour for their service on the Western Front.

"Any development on the battlefields of the Western Front raises the possibility that unmarked graves might also be uncovered."

## Lest we forget our heroes

Story and Picture:  
**MARK BRANDON**

IT MAY be nearly 90 years since the horror of World War I shook the globe.

However one local couple is questioning how long the memory of Australia's fallen war heroes should be held sacred in countries they fought to protect.

George and Shirley Stevens were devastated to read in national newspapers that the French Government was proposing to build an airport on Australian grave sites in the Somme Valley.

Mr and Mrs Stevens have a strong bond to the tragedy of the Great War.

Mrs Stevens' father fought in the Somme Valley, while her uncle was a member of the famed 1st Light Horse Regiment serving at Gallipoli.

Mr Stevens' uncle lost his left arm during an engagement at Motlancourt in the heart of the Somme Valley and his father was also an officer on a troop carrier during the Great War.

According to the couple, the proposed airport plan makes a mockery of the courage and sacrifice made by Australian soldiers, who fought a world away from home, in a war in which they had little to gain.

"It is an extremely insensitive proposal to build an airport on the grave sites of our men who died defending French soil and fighting for French freedom," Mr Stevens said.

"Australians went to help France



**GRAVE CONCERNS:** George and Shirley Stevens are concerned that our war heroes are being forgotten with the Somme war graves proposal.

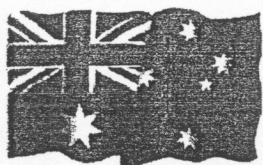
because they were honourable men helping fellow men being attacked by an aggressor.

"Currently in the Shoalhaven library there is a display of some of Frank Hurley's graphic photos taken in northern France during World War I.

"We urge all residents to look at this display, in particular the scene of our dead soldiers lying in the mud.

"Having inspected this excellent display we recommend that everyone writes to the French Ambassador expressing disgust and concern about this very insensitive proposal."





# Media Release

The Hon Danna Vale MP

*Minister for Veterans' Affairs · Minister Assisting the Minister for Defence · Federal Member for Hughes*

VA18

Thursday 14 March 2002

## COMMONWEALTH NATIONS UNITED ON FRENCH WAR GRAVES

Australia and other Commonwealth nations are taking a united stand to preserve war graves under threat from French plans for an international airport on the Somme, the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, Danna Vale, said today.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) met last night in London to discuss the latest developments in plans for the airport. The proposed development zone recently declared by French authorities takes in eight Commonwealth war cemeteries, including three which hold the graves of 61 Australians killed in action during the two World Wars.

"Last night, Australia's High Commissioner to Britain, Michael L'Estrange, informed the CWGC of Australia's strong desire that war graves on the Western Front be left undisturbed," Minister Vale said.

"Britain, New Zealand, Canada and India fully supported these concerns at the meeting and the Federal Government welcomes this united position.

"The Commission will be taking these concerns to the French Government and seeking full consultation with a view to removing any threat to the war graves of Commonwealth servicemen. Our ambassador to France is also taking up Australia's concerns directly with Paris. I will be meeting with Mr L'Estrange next week and will be discussing this issue and re-enforcing our concerns.

"France has always been sensitive to the need to preserve the graves of those who sacrificed their lives for democracy during two World Wars. The airport proposal is still in the early phases of development and we would expect that any final decision would reflect the deep respect held by France and all of our nations for our war dead," the Minister said.

Minister Vale said she had instructed the Office of Australian War Graves to continue to vigorously raise Australia's concerns with the CWGC and French authorities, to ensure these sacred resting places were not disturbed.

Australia is also keeping a close watch on proposals in Belgium to extend the A19 motorway in Flanders across the World War I battlefield Ypres.

"The Commonwealth War Graves Commission has raised concerns that burial grounds might be affected by these roadworks," Minister Vale said.

"The proposed route at this stage lies outside the main area of Australian operations at Ypres, although a final decision is yet to be made. Belgian authorities already have indicated to the Commission that they will be avoiding disturbing any war grave sites, in keeping with their approach to other works undertaken on former battlefields.

"With any construction project on the Western Front, there is the concern that previously undiscovered graves may be disturbed. In those cases the Office of Australian War Graves will work with the CWGC to ensure that any remains identified as those of an Australian serviceman are reinterred in a Commonwealth War Cemetery," she said.

**Media contact: Rachael Thompson (02) 6277 7820 or 0417 265 289**

12 Minerva Avenue  
Vincentia 2540  
4441 6992  
March 15, 2002

Mr Rod Simpson,  
President Huskisson R.S.L. Sub Branch  
Owen Street  
Huskisson 2540

Dear Rod,

I understand that at last night's Sub Branch meeting there was some discussion on the French government's proposal to build an international airport in the Somme region of northern France, and that there appeared to be a general lack of knowledge by the members at the meeting of some of the issues likely to affect Australian war graves. As I will be in Geelong at the date of the April meeting and unable to attend, I thought it might help any further discussions if I passed on to you via this letter some relevant comments.

My wife Shirley and I visited the Somme during September 2000 and participated in an RSL (Victoria) comprehensive war historian guided tour of the WW1 battlefields, visiting among other locations many of the towns and villages where Shirley's father was engaged as a Field Artilleryman, and Morlancourt where my uncle in Heavy Trench Mortars lost his left arm

In a triangular area bounded by Ieper (Ypres) to the north, Amiens to the south and St Quentin to the east (roughly 90 Km NS and 90 Km EW, say Ulladulla to Kiama) there are approximately 1,000 war cemeteries and memorials. Some cemeteries are relatively small with perhaps 150 graves. Others are huge with thousands of graves. See note #1 below.

Each headstone in a cemetery marks the place where known remains are buried. During battles and immediately after, bodies identified had ID information such as dog tags, pay book, personal letters etc attached to the body which was then temporarily buried in a marked mass grave site. Later when the cemeteries were established, the temporary burial sites were dug up, and the marked bodies transferred and buried in marked plots. Headstones were progressively made for some years after and gradually installed at the plots. Careful records were kept at every step. Today one can enter a cemetery gate and pick up a register which lists alphabetically by surname of the soldier, and provides the plot, row and number for the precise location of his grave. One can have full confidence that the information is accurate in that if the inscription reads that Pte. J. Bloggs is buried there, then he definitely is.

As well, there were those whose bodies were either blown to pieces or just



buried in the mud, never to be found. At Tyn Cot Australian Memorial near Villers Bretonneux there is a large memorial, but no graves or headstones. Here at Tyn Cot the Memorial has engraved on the stones the names of 10,982 Australians whose bodies have no marked burial site. At Fromelles there is another similar memorial with 1,299 Australian names. In total during WW1 23,397 Australian troops died and whose bodies have never been recovered or identified. Compare with the present population of the whole of the City of Shoalhaven and you get a feel for the magnitude of this horror. At Thiepval a few Km away from Tyn Cot is a similar memorial. This lists the names of another 110,000 British & Commonwealth troops who also have simply disappeared.

Now you start to get a feel for why people like Shirley and me are so concerned about insensitive government proposals to dig up not only the graves of our men but also the areas where so many do not have marked graves.

It gets worse. At Menin just across the Belgian border there are more plans to disturb graves to build a freeway. Here at the Menin Gate, every night at dusk since 1916, except for the period of WW2, buglers play the Last Post. Typically each evening 200 - 300 people attend. The walls of the Gate have many Australian names enscribed. It is truly hallowed ground. The people of Menin are committed to play the Last Post once for every dead Allied soldier who fought against the WW1 aggressors. This may take 100s more years. But that illustrates the depth of feeling these local people feel.

Present day RSL members are preoccupied with WW2, Korea and Vietnam, for reasons of their personal involvement. Because there are now fewer numbers who have had a living association with WW1, this war assumes a lower level of importance to the majority of RSL members. To put some of these numbers into perspective, look at the following table, and you will see that almost two thirds of our war deaths during 5 wars were sustained during WW1.

DEATHS	Identified	Missing	Total
WW1	38,462	23,397	61,859
WW2	28,275	12,124	40,397
Korea	291	44	335
Malaya	53	3	56
Vietnam	514	6	520

Note #1. To see graphically the extent of cemeteries and memorials in northern France where our men died, I recommend that you contact the Research Officer of the Office of the Australian War Graves PO Box 21, Woden, ACT 2061, phone 6289 6510, fax 6289 4861 and ask him/her to mail to you a copy of each of Michelin Map 51 and 53. These are French printed road maps, overprinted by the AWG with identification numbers of the hundreds of cemeteries and graves in and around the Somme and the fields of Flanders. From these you will see why it is literally impossible to build an international airport without affecting any burial sites - marked and unmarked. Consider that an international airport, complete with runways, taxi ways, terminals, domestic feeder airlines, and infrastructure of supply and maintenance depots, hotels and associated catering facilities, road transport and vehicle parking, rail transport etc, etc, will require a minimum of 35 square Km. There are very few areas near the Somme and Flanders where such a facility might be constructed.

Rod, if you would like me to expand on any of the foregoing, please call.

Regards,

George Stevens





**OFFICE OF AUSTRALIAN WAR GRAVES**

**Air Vice-Marshal Gary J. J. Beck AO (Ret'd)  
Director**

Ref:

19 March, 2002

Mr George Stevens  
12 Minerva Avenue  
VINCENTIA NSW 2540

Dear Mr Stevens

I am writing in response to your letter of 27 February 2002 regarding the proposed third Paris airport.

I am aware of this issue and share your concern. Let me assure you that my office is closely monitoring developments in France and is in regular contact with both the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Late last week, the Australian High Commissioner to London raised the Federal Government's concerns with the Commission and received strong support from the Commission's other member nations. Australia's Ambassador to France has also raised these concerns directly with Paris. Further, the Minister has instructed me to continue to vigorously pursue this issue to ensure these sacred resting places are not disturbed.

I'd like to thank you for writing to me on this issue and assure you that my office will do everything within its power to ensure that the concerns of Australians such as yourself are made known to the French authorities.

Yours sincerely

13 KELTIE ST  
PHILLIP ACT 2606

PO BOX 21  
WODEN ACT 2606

TELEPHONE: (02) 62896477  
FACSIMILE: (02) 62894861  
INTERNET: <http://www.dva.gov.au>  
EMAIL: [gary.beck@dva.gov.au](mailto:gary.beck@dva.gov.au)



OFFICE OF THE  
MINISTER FOR VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
MINISTER ASSISTING THE MINISTER FOR DEFENCE

Mr and Mrs G Stevens  
12 Minerva Avenue  
VINCENTIA NSW 2540

Dear Mr and Mrs Stevens

I refer to your letter of 24 February 2002 to the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, the Hon Danna Vale MP, concerning the French Government's proposal to build a third Paris airport in the Somme region. The Minister has asked me to respond on her behalf.

The French Government has not yet approved the construction of this International Airport in the Somme Region south of Chaulnes-Vermandovillers. However, the recently revised development zone encompasses approximately 10,000 hectares of the Somme area. Should the development proceed, the airport would take up approximately one third of the area within this zone.

The Minister is aware that this region holds great historical significance, not only for Australians, but also for the people of France, Canada, Britain and many other nations that fought on the Western Front during World War I. The construction of such an airport would inevitably disturb the remains of unknown Commonwealth war dead that may be buried there. However, the majority of the remains within this zone are expected to be German, French, British and Canadian. The Australian infantry positions closest to the area proposed for the airport were predominantly to the north and northwest of the proposed site around Lihons and Harbonnieres respectively.

Of the eight Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) cemeteries that lie within the designated area, three contain identified Australian war graves. The Fouquescourt British Cemetery south of Lihons was created after the Armistice by the concentration of graves from other burial grounds and from the battlefields in a wide area around this village. It contains 376 Commonwealth graves of which 49 are Australian. The Bouchoir New British Cemetery was also created after the Armistice through the concentration of several small British cemeteries and of other graves from battlefields round Bouchoir and south of the village. It contains 763 Commonwealth graves; six of which are Australian. The foregoing confirms our historical knowledge that Australian



operations were mainly undertaken to the north and northwest of the proposed site.

The World War II Meharicourt Communal Cemetery contains 41 Commonwealth graves, six of whom are Australian. Of the remaining five cemeteries within the proposed site, there are no known Australian graves.

The Minister has sought to highlight Australia's concerns regarding this issue. She contacted the Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Hon Alexander Downer MP, asking that Australia's Ambassador to France take up our concerns directly with Paris. Further, Australia's High Commissioner to Britain informed the CWGC of Australia's strong desire that war graves on the Western Front be left undisturbed. This view was supported by the Commission's other member nations. Because of these diplomatic efforts, France has agreed to consult the Federal Government before relocating war graves to build this proposed third airport. For your information, I have enclosed the Minister's press release regarding this issue.

A final decision on the boundaries of the proposed site will be made in 2003 after an impact study involving public consultation has been finalised. The impact study being conducted by the French Parliament will need to consider the real cost of archaeological investigation of the proposed site and proper burial of the remains of war dead. The Australian Government through the CWGC will, of course, closely monitor developments.

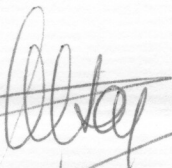
The Embassy in Paris also advises that any action on this project is unlikely to occur within the next decade. The proposal is highly contested in the region and has not been supported by large elements of the aviation industry. While it is too early to judge the outcome of the impact study, the Minister has instructed the Office of Australian War Graves to continue to vigorously raise Australia's concerns with the CWGC and French authorities, to ensure that these resting places remain undisturbed. In the past, French authorities have taken every care to ensure that war cemeteries remain undisturbed. Consequently, the decision to undertake a project of this scale would not be taken lightly.

Nevertheless, if the French authorities did proceed with this proposal and Commonwealth war graves were disturbed, Australia would expect French authorities to meet the cost of transferring the remains of our war dead to an already established Commission war cemetery. The next of kin would be kept fully informed throughout this process. Similarly, should the remains of any war dead be discovered, their remains would be treated with the same sensitivity and reverence as they have been in the past. These remains would be handed

over to the CWGC for burial in one of its war cemeteries and, if identified, a military funeral would be held with next of kin in attendance.

The Minister shares your concern that the graves and any undiscovered remains of Australian soldiers are treated with sensitivity and respect. She wishes to reassure you that long-standing practices covering such events are still honoured today and will be forever more.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Peter Hulsing', is written over a horizontal line.

Peter Hulsing  
Adviser

25 MAR 2002

Encl

# French promise to respect war graves

By MARK BRANDON

VINCENTIA residents George and Shirley Stevens have had their fears about Australian war graves in France allayed by the French consulate.

The couple, who spoke of their concern in the South Coast Register (13/3/02), had written to the French government about the plans to relocate the graves of more than 60 Australian soldiers to make room for a new airport.

Last week they received a letter back from the French consulate.

"It is what I hoped for but not what I expected," Mr Stevens said about the French response.

"I am very hopeful because of the extent of international and local interest that has been generated by this whole thing.

"I don't think we'll hear a decision about the airport's location for a couple of years, but local feeling towards Australia from people in the northern areas of France is very strong.

"The authorities seem to be doing everything possible to ensure our historic interests are protected and a number of countries are working together to make sure the French don't do anything stupid."

Premier Bob Carr has received assurances that the construction of a new airport near Paris will take into account the location of Australian war graves.

Mr Carr received a response from French Ambassador, Pierre Viaux, on March 18, assuring him that if war graves are affected by the airport, the French Government would work in close co-operation with Australia for the transferral of the graves.

"I understand your concern with regard to the remains of those Australians who fell on the fields of France during the Great War," Mr Viaux said.

"France places great importance on respecting the memory of the 61,720 young Australian men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice in the name of defending our common values of liberty and freedom.

"This same respect applies to all war graves located on French soil."